

Snowflakes and Sakura Petals

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Summary: As time passed, Chizuru came to realize that her romance with Saito Hajime was inextricably linked to the blossoming sakura and the falling snow. ChizuruxSaito

Snowflakes and Sakura Petals

I just had so much fun writing "An Unexpected Life" that I had to write another ChizuruxSaito fic, so here it is. Enjoy :)

Disclaimer: I do not own Hakuouki or any of its characters. I only own my own ideas.

They met in the snow.

Chizuru had only come to Kyoto in search of her missing father, but it seemed she was destined to have her life threatened. First by a group of ronin, then by the horde of rasetsu who had saved her from the ronin, then by the Shinsengumi who had saved her from the rasetsu. If she wasn't so afraid that every man she met that night was going to murder her, she would have seen the irony. Officially, it was Saito who saved her. He was the one who killed the rasetsu who wanted to drink her blood. And he was not happy to have a witness. He didn't want to kill an innocent civilian, but he would have if Hijikata had ordered him to. Still, her presence complicated things. Little did they know that that first encounter would significantly alter the course of both of their lives.

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They bickered under the sakura.

Chizuru had wandered into the courtyard, looking for something she could help with. Saito was there, sitting under a bright pink sakura tree, doing laundry. Stray sakura petals fell lazily all around him,

several landing in his washbasin.

"I thought you were told not to leave your room without permission," he said coolly, scrubbing away at a bed sheet.

"I was, but I can't just sit around all day doing nothing. Can I help you with that?" she offered, indicating the basin of water, washboard, and pile of yet unwashed sheets and clothes.

"It is unnecessary. Return to your room."

"But you have so much left to do. It'll go faster if we both work."

"It is not your responsibility," Saito replied, never pausing in his scrubbing. But Chizuru was stubborn.

"You had the late patrol last night. You barely had any sleep, and I know you didn't miss training this morning. You must be exhausted already, and laundry is tiring work. Please, let me help." For the first time since their conversation began, Saito's hands stopped moving. He stared at her, eyes narrowed, as he analyzed her intently.

"How did you know I had the night patrol yesterday?" he asked, his voice accusatory. Chizuru gulped. Was she not supposed to know that? But she held her ground.

"I live here too. I know the Shinsengumi has lots of secrets, and I'm not interested in those, but the patrol schedule is common knowledge, isn't it. Of course I know who goes out when." Saito considered her. It was true that the patrol schedule was no secret, but he never thought that she would bother to remember something like that. Maybe she really was just looking for a way to fit in at headquarters.

"And," Chizuru continued, "since I live here and eat your food, I want to do something to help. So I don't feel so useless." Saito sighed. He didn't enjoy losing fights, but this one was beginning to feel like a lost cause.

"There is another washboard next to the well," he said, returning to his laundry. Chizuru gave him a broad smile.

"Thanks Saito-san!" She collected the washboard and returned to join him, and Saito had to admit that the work was much faster and more pleasant when two people did it together.

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He protected her in the snow.

They had been sent grocery shopping since Chizuru seemed to be the only one who could do it properly and she wasn't allowed out of headquarters alone. They were walking back with their groceries, soft snow crunching under their feet.

"We're lucky they had some daikon left," Chizuru said. "Most places are running low already." Saito nodded. They continued chatting about nothing in particular when they turned a corner and Chizuru crashed

headfirst into an enormous, burly man, at least twice her size, and all her purchases fell out of her arms and scattered on the snow covered ground.

"Hey kid," the man growled. "Watch where you're going."

"I'm sorry," Chizuru apologized quickly, kneeling down to pick up her dropped items. The man scoffed and, without warning, kicked Chizuru hard in the chest. She flew backwards with a thud, landing on a snowdrift that mercifully cushioned her fall, but every part of her ached. Saito dropped the things he was holding and stepped between her and her assailant, his hand on the hilt of his sword. The look on his face was terrifying enough to kill small animals.

"Would you mind telling me why you did that," he said, his eyes dark. The man just smirked.

"I was just teaching the kid a lesson," he replied with confidence. "When you apologize to someone, you look them in the eye. You should thank me." Saito's grip on his sword tightened.

"That was still no reason to harm her." The man eyed Saito's stance and laughed.

"You really think you can take me? Scrawny little thing like you. Well, if you want to settle this with swords, I'm not going to argue. Just don't blame me when you're missing a few pieces." He grinned with satisfaction and reached for his sword. The man hadn't even finished drawing when Saito moved. In the blink of an eye, Saito rushed forwards and rammed the back of his blade into the man's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. The man lurched forward and fell to the floor with a sickening crunch. He lay on the ground, gasping for breath, but Saito ignored him and turned to Chizuru.

"Are you alright?" he asked. Chizuru nodded. Saito offered her his hand.

"Can you stand?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied, taking his proffered hand to help her regain her balance. Saito gathered all the dropped purchases.

"Let's go," he said, and Chizuru was not going to argue. They were silent on the way back to headquarters. Chizuru was still sore where the man had kicked her and where she had hit the ground, but she was curious about something else. Finally, she worked up the courage to ask Saito her question.

"You didn't kill him," she said. "Why?"

"Should I have?" Saito replied.

"Well, it's justâ€¦you've never seemed to hesitate to kill people like that before. He was drawing his sword and everything. No one would have blamed you if you did." Saito didn't respond right away. He seemed to be considering his answer.

"You've seen too many people die already, and will likely see more the longer you stay with us. You do not need to see any more death

than necessary." Chizuru was startled by his reply. She had never thought that Saito would take her mental wellbeing into consideration like that, but it warmed her heart that he did so.

"Thank you, Saito-san," she said.

"It is unneeded."

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He comforted her under the sakura.

They had just moved to Nishi Hongwanji, and the hustle and bustle of the move had distracted her, but now that they were settled in, she had time to think about recent events and her newfound knowledge. She sat under a sakura tree, trying to collect her thoughts. Sannan had told her about the ochimizu, what it was capable of and what it did to people. She had seen firsthand how much Sannan suffered, and how he almost lost his mind and tried to kill her. And it was not the first time a rasetsu, mad with bloodlust, had tried to take her life. She couldn't believe that her father was involved in something so horrible and dangerous. No, she didn't want to believe it. She sighed and stared up at the tree, her heart heavy with pain.

"Is something wrong?" Chizuru glanced over to see Saito standing in front of her, looking at her with concern. Did she look that upset?

"No it'sâ€¦nothing," she started to say, but lying to Saito seemed like a futile endeavor. He was eerily perceptive.

"If you wish, you can tell me what's bothering you," he offered. Chizuru didn't respond, but Saito sat down anyway, and waited patiently for her to speak. He would have waited all day, she realized, and just the fact that he was willing to sit beside her in her moment of weakness brought her solace and strength. She decided she could tell him what was on her mind.

"It's my father," she said at last. "Did he really research the ochimizu? Did he really conduct such horrific experiments on people? He's a doctor. He's always been dedicated to saving people and helping them. Why would he work on something so terrible? I just don't understand." Chizuru didn't realize she had begun to cry until she felt the tears trickle down her cheeks, but once she started she couldn't stop, and she began sobbing into her sleeve. Suddenly she felt a gentle hand on her head as Saito slowly stroked her hair.

"Kodo-san is a good man," he said. "I believe that he only researched the ochimizu because he wanted to do the most good for the greatest number of people by using the rasetsu to help stabilize the country. Ochimizu can also effectively be used to revive people who have received mortal wounds. No other medicine can do that. But, in the end, I feel that his conscious won out, which is why he disappeared. I believe that your father is a moral man, and an excellent doctor." Saito's words of praise for Kodo brought Chizuru more comfort than she realized they could, and her tears finally stopped. Saito continued to stroke her hair as they watched the sakura fall around them.

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He treated her illness in the snow.

The winter cold was bitter and harsh, and had taken its toll on the Shinsengumi. Several of them were out of commission with severe colds, and before long, Chizuru had come down with a high fever and was sent to bed. She lay in her futon, shivering violently against the relentless cold that seeped in through the walls. The heavy snow outside also brought with it a damp chill which only compounded the problem, and no matter how hard she tried, Chizuru could not get warm.

Someone called her name outside her room, then the door slid open and Saito stepped inside, closing the door as quickly as he could to prevent the thin heat in the room from escaping.

"I brought you some hot soup," he said, placing a tray down by her bedside. Chizuru had never been more grateful to hear those words. She sat up, keeping her blankets wrapped around her as much as she could.

"Thank you, Saito-san."

"How are you feeling?" he asked. Chizuru managed a faint smile.

"I'm alright. Just a bit cold." 'A bit' was an understatement, but she didn't want Saito to know just how freezing she really was. They were short on blankets already and she didn't want to be selfish by taking another one. Saito frowned. As always, he could see right through her lie. He unwrapped the scarf he always wore around his neck and draped it over her shoulders.

"Wear this," he said. "It's not much, but it should help. You'll never recover if you're cold." The scarf felt warm from Saito's body heat and as Chizuru pulled it around her more tightly, she realized it smelled like him. She blushed at the thought, but she liked the way it smelled and she buried her face in it to hide her now burning cheeks.

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They danced under the sakura.

It was a warm, spring evening and headquarters was unusually quiet. Hijikata and some of the other officers and soldiers had gone to Osaka for a few days, so the chatter of voices and clashing of training swords that were ordinarily heard at this time of day were absent. Which may have been why Chizuru heard the music. It was a soft tune, unlike any she had ever heard before, and she was curious, so she left her room to see (or hear) where it was coming from.

To her utter surprise, the sound was coming from Saito. He was sitting on the porch outside his room, sipping sake and humming absentmindedly as he gazed at the sakura lit by the soft light of the moon. He stopped as he heard her approach.

"Who's there?" he asked, more harshly than was probably necessary.

"It's just me," Chizuru replied, coming closer so he could see her properly. Chizuru saw a flush rise in his cheeks.

"Good evening," he said, staring intently at his sake. Chizuru knew that he was embarrassed that she had caught him humming, but she was too curious to let it slide.

"What was that tune?" she asked. "I've never heard anything like it before."

"What tune?" Saito replied. Chizuru giggled.

"Saito-san, you don't have to be embarrassed. I thought your humming was lovely." The color in Saito's cheeks increased.

"It's something they have been playing lately in Shimabara," he said at last. "It's imported from the West. I believe it's called a waltz."

"Well, I thought it was beautiful," Chizuru said.

"There's a dance to it as well," Saito continued. "It's very popular among the geisha."

"Really? I'd love to see it someday."

"It's not something you see, it's something you do," Saito corrected. Chizuru looked confused.

"But don't geisha perform dances? Isn't that their job?"

"Ordinarily yes, but a waltz isn't a performance. It's simple enough that one can learn it with ease, and the entertainment comes from two people dancing it together." Chizuru's eyes widened.

"That's so unusual," she marveled. "What an interesting idea. But it sounds like fun!" Saito looked at her and seemed to be choosing his next words with great care. He turned away from her and addressed the sakura tree instead.

"Would you like to try? Dancing the waltz?" Chizuru was taken aback by the question.

"You know how?" Saito nodded.

"As I said, it is quite popular in Shimabara. The geisha there taught all of us." Chizuru had a sudden mental image of Shinpachi, Sano, and Heisuke trying to dance a traditional geisha fan dance in a Shimabara banquet hall and couldn't control her laughter. Saito misinterpreted her reaction and a blush rose in his cheeks.

"If you would rather not," he began, but Chizuru shook her head.

"No, I'm sorry, it's nothing. I'd love to try." For some reason, Saito's blush only deepened, but he rose and stepped out onto the grass under the tree. Chizuru followed him.

"Alright then," he said. "This is the basic stance." And before Chizuru knew what was happening, Saito had moved very close to her.

He took one of her hands in his own and placed his other on her back. Chizuru's brain reeled from the sudden invasion of her personal space, but rather than being scared or offended, she found she was deeply flustered. Her heart pounded and her mind seemed to be on hyper-drive.

"Put your other hand on my shoulder," Saito instructed, and Chizuru did as she was told, unable to think of anything else.

"Now," Saito continued. "Follow my lead." He stepped forward and she stepped back. Saito was right, the dance was simple. It took her a few minutes, but she caught on quickly, and soon they were waltzing though the courtyard, following a melody that only they could hear. The night seemed magical, and Chizuru was aware of every detail: the rough callouses on Saito's palm, the burning spot on her back where his hand rested, the cool breeze that rustled his hair, and the sweet smell of sakura that danced in the wind along with them.

Eventually the dance ended. Chizuru thanked Saito and returned to her room, but she couldn't sleep. Her heart was racing and her grin seemed to be permanently glued to her face. Chizuru knew that she would treasure that night for a long time.

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She fell in love with him in the snow.

Chizuru wasn't sure why it was a snow bunny of all things that made her realize that she had fallen hopelessly in love with Saito Hajime, but once she had made the realization, there was no turning back.

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He left her under the sakura.

He had said he wanted to leave with Itou, that that was where his ambitions lay and where he needed to be to do what he believed in. Chizuru wanted to support him, so she sent him off with a smile, but she felt like her heart had ripped in two. She cried herself to sleep that night. She was worried that she would never see him again, and scared that he might eventually become the Shinsengumi's enemy if imperialists and loyalists continued to butt heads. But worst of all, she felt crushed that her feelings for him seemed to be completely one sided. She hadn't said anything to him about it, and Saito was the same as always, but if he had loved her at all, she reasoned, he would have stayed. The fact that he left proved to her that she meant nothing to him, and that pain hurt more than she could possibly imagine.

Little did she know that in the new headquarters of the Guardians of the Imperial Tomb, Saito was also having difficulty sleeping, his head filled only with thoughts of her.

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He declared his love for her in the snow.

It had been two weeks since he had returned to the Shinsengumi, but much had happened and he had been so busy that he hadn't had the

opportunity to speak to her alone. The morning was crisp and cool, and delicate snowflakes fell as he walked to the well to wash his face after morning training. And there she was, drawing water, her breath coming out in puffs of smoke, her cheeks red with cold. He smiled despite himself.

"You should be inside on a cold day like this," he said as he approached.

"Saito-san!" she said with a gasp. "You startled me." It had been months since they'd had an actual conversation, but they slipped back into old habits with surprising ease, and soon Chizuru was smiling.

"I'm sorry I left you," he said, and Chizuru shook her head.

"You shouldn't be sorry. You were following orders. I know how important the Shinsengumi is to you. Leaving must have been hard on you. I'm sure you were a lot lonelier than I was. But you're back now, and that's what matters."

"Still, I wasn't here to protect you, and for that I'm sorry." Chizuru's face turned red, and it had nothing to do with the cold.

"Well, I certainly missed you," she admitted. "I'm really glad you're back." Saito smiled at her.

"I am too." He reached forward and placed a hand on her cheek. It felt hot on her chilled skin and suddenly, she was completely unaware of the cold. All she could feel was Saito's hand, and all she could see was his eyes, which were looking at her with the most tender expression she had ever seen on his face.

"I missed you," he said, and though his voice was quiet, it rang in Chizuru's ears like a gong. "I worried about you, how you were doing. And I realized something while we were apart." He took a deep breath. He had planned for this moment, but now that it was here, he found himself unfathomably nervous. But he had a mission, and he was determined to carry it out.

"We live in dangerous times," he continued. "People die in the streets of Kyoto every day. Particularly those of us who are fighting for a cause. Every day when I leave headquarters, there is uncertainty as to whether or not I will return. I do not fear death in and of itself. What I fear is straying from the path that I believe in, and dying with regret. And you now constitute one of the things I do not wish to regret." Chizuru's heart skipped a beat as Saito took a calm, steadying breath.

"I'm unsure of how you feel about me," Saito said. "But I no longer want you to be unsure of how I feel about you. I love you." His words filled the otherwise silent yard. The falling snowflakes settled on their hair and shoulders and they stood still for what seemed like hours as Saito's words echoed over and over inside Chizuru's head. Tears sprung unbidden to her eyes and rolled down her frozen cheeks.

"Saito-san," she stammered, but she couldn't get the words out. Instead she wrapped her arms around him. She felt his arms encircle

her and snuggled into his warm embrace.

"I love you too," she whispered, and even though she couldn't see his face, she could feel Saito's smile.

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They kissed under the sakura.

Saito had to leave for Aizu. Chizuru knew that. Hijikata was wounded and there was no one else who could lead the troops.

"Let me go with you," she pleaded, but Saito shook his head.

"There will be nothing in Aizu but fierce battles. It is not a place for you. I want you to be safe. If I bring you to Aizu and you are killed, I will never forgive myself." Chizuru opened her mouth to protest, but Saito silenced her by placing a finger on her lips.

"Take care of Hijikata-san," he said. "And live. I promise to do the same, and one day, I will see you again." He leaned forward and replaced his finger with his lips. The kiss was so much more than just a kiss. It was a promise. A promise that they would live through the war and see each other again. Chizuru could only pray that that promise would be fulfilled.

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He missed her in the snow.

There were no coal burning braziers or cozy fires in the prisoner of war camp. Icy wind blew in through the cracks in the walls and the thin blanket provided to him was essentially useless.

Saito had been severely injured during the fighting in Aizu, and while he was unconscious, he had been captured. In prison, he recovered from his wounds, albeit slowly, and now he spent his days wondering where Chizuru was and what she was doing. He hoped she was safe. Hijikata wouldn't let her die so easily, he reasoned, but war was war, and things happened. But despite everything, he was grateful for his life. As long as he was alive, he could find her again. As long as he was alive, there was hope. That hope kept him warm through the frigid winter months.

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She betrayed him under the sakura.

They had received word that Saito had died in battle, and had no reason to believe otherwise. Grief clung to Chizuru like a leech, always painful and constantly draining her of her life-force, so that she became weaker with each passing day. But the worst part of all was that she couldn't mourn openly. She and Saito had kept their romance a secret, partly because she was disguised as a man, and partly because they did not want to create unnecessary tension and drama among the officers. But that meant that, apart from a few tears upon hearing the news, Chizuru had to keep her feelings bottled up inside.

Hijikata's affection for her came as something of a surprise. She had no intention of betraying Saito, but after word arrived of his death, she leaned on Hijikata as her last bastion of support. She knew that his embraces meant something very different to him, but for her it just felt good to feel human contact, and when Hijikata held her, she could feel some of the tension begin to ease.

When Hijikata kissed her, she kissed back despite herself. She did not love him. She still loved Saito, and always would, but she liked the way her mind went blank when she felt Hijikata's lips on her own. It gave her a brief respite from her pain.

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They reunited in the snow.

The war was long over and Chizuru had returned to her old home in Edo, for lack of anywhere else to go. She went through the motions of daily life, cooking and cleaning and treating small wounds for neighbors, but her heart wasn't in it. She felt lost and broken and alone.

One day she awoke to find the world covered in a fresh layer of snow. The sky was a perfect crystal blue and the sun reflected off the snow, which twinkled like diamonds. Chizuru lit a fire to warm herself and was just finishing her solitary breakfast when she heard a knock at the front door.

"It's a bit early for patients," she thought. She wasn't nearly skilled enough to treat major emergencies, so she rarely received any, but she certainly wasn't going to turn an injured person away. So she opened the door to see who was there. And promptly fell over in surprise.

She was convinced she had seen a ghost. Literally. Saito's hair had grown longer since the last time she had seen him and now hung wild and unkempt at his shoulders. He looked terribly thin, like he hadn't had a proper meal in months. His tattered white robe and bare feet were hardly appropriate for the cold. But there was no denying the affectionate smile on his face and the loving look in his eyes.

"S...Saito-san," Chizuru gasped, still not entirely convinced that he wasn't a ghost or an illusion.

"I'm home," he whispered, his voice weak and hoarse. And then, all his energy spent, he fell to his knees, completely and utterly exhausted.

"Saito-san!" Chizuru exclaimed, no longer caring if he was real or just a figment of her imagination. She put an arm around him and led him inside, settling him down by the fire.

"Here, it isn't much, but this should help warm you up," she said, wrapping a blanket around his shoulders. "Wait right there and I'll get you something to eat." Saito nodded and Chizuru hurriedly prepared a second breakfast for him. He ate with gusto, savoring every bite.

"This is delicious," he said with a smile. "I missed your cooking."

Chizuru was not amused.

"I'm sorry Saito-san, but would you mind explaining yourself. I'm having a bit of trouble understanding what's going on. It's the wrong season for Obon." Saito lowered his chopsticks and gaped at her.

"You thought I was dead? Where did you hear that?"

"That's what we were told." Saito sighed deeply.

"I'm sorry, I had no idea." His guilt was clear on his face, but Chizuru still felt she deserved an explanation.

"So, if you're not dead, then where've you been all this time?" Saito launched into the story of his injury and capture, sparing her the details of some of the more brutal aspects of the prison.

"They released me about two weeks ago with nothing but the clothes I was wearing," he said. "I headed straight here, hoping that this was where you ended up. And thankfully, it was." Chizuru had tears in her eyes. All the hardships she had endured since the false news of his death were nothing compared to what he must have suffered.

"Oh Saito-san," she cried, throwing her arms around him. "I'm so sorry for everything you had to go through. But I'm so happy that you're alive and here. I love you." Saito could only hold her as tightly as he could, allowing this moment of happiness to seep into his bones.

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They were married under the sakura.

Saito had recovered some of his strength and looked much healthier than he had the day he showed up half dead on Chizuru's doorstep. It was a perfect spring day and they decided it was high time they make things official. They called friends from the neighborhood as witnesses as they shared sake beneath the blossoming sakura tree in the yard to become husband and wife. That day, Saito thought that Chizuru was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life, and considering how much time he had spent in Shimabara, that was saying something.

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They reminisced in the snow.

One evening, huddled together for warmth, they sat on the porch and watched the falling snow turn the world white.

"You know I fell in love with you in the snow," Chizuru said, resting her head on his shoulder. Saito smiled and wrapped his arm around her.

"Me too," he replied, and Chizuru thought he might also be talking about the snow bunny incident, but he was actually referring to a day long before that. For Chizuru, her love for Saito grew slowly over time, like a sakura flower blooming, but for Saito, it was more like a raging blizzard. He fell in love with her at first sight; a woman

in men's clothing, splattered with the blood of her would be murderer, and looking up at him, the man who had splattered her with it, with awe. It was a sight he would never forget, and for some reason he couldn't explain, he knew in that moment that she would become someone very special to him. And he was right.

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Their children were born under the sakura.

Twins, a boy and a girl. Chizuru named them Yuki and Sakura, because in her mind, her romance with Saito was inextricably linked to the sakura and the snow.

****There it is! I had a blast writing this fic, and I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it ;)****

****Some explanations:****

****Obon: A festival in Japan where dead relatives are believed to return home for several days. Celebrated in the summer.****

****Yuki: The Japanese word for snow.****

End
file.